

Goodness, gracious, great walls of pumpkins

**Tiny New Hampshire town
hosts a big fall spectacle**

By **VICTOR ZAK**
TRAVEL EDITOR

THE BEGINNING OF fall augurs a seasonal rite in southwestern New Hampshire that you can count on as sure as the leaves will change color.

Folks in the little town of Keene are gearing up for a nationally acclaimed pumpkin festival and hoping to set a new record for the "Guinness World Records" book. On Oct. 20, residents aim to have enough lighted jack-o'-lanterns on display to outnumber its population of some 24,000.

This year's goal is 35,000 of the orange gourds, said events coordinator Suzanne Woodward of Center Stage Cheshire County, a nonprofit organization that produces the fest.

"It's about pride in a small community. We don't publicize it much. It's just out there that the third week of October is pumpkin festival time in Keene," Woodward said about what has become Keene's biggest community event and a major fundraiser for charities.

What began as a simple Harvest Festival in 1991 with 600 pumpkins has grown like an out-of-control amoeba into a spectacle of wholesome Americana.

"The pumpkins just sort of happened. People kept bringing more and more," said Michael Topa, front desk manager at the E.F. Lane Hotel.

In 15 years, Keene has set eight world records for "most lit jack-o'-lanterns in

one place," most recently in 2003 with 28,952. And the word has gotten out. Festival crowds grow larger by the year.

"Now, we're on the See **Pumpkins**, Page **F5** map," Woodward said. "People come from all over the country, Canada and Europe."

Meanwhile, Keene's success has spurred a crop of competing events across the nation, from Boston to San Diego.

This year's festival will offer a daylong menu of family-friendly events, most centered on Keene's Main Street and central square, which will be closed to vehicles. They include a craft fair, live entertainment on three stages, a costume parade for children, pie-eating and seed-spitting contests, and evening fireworks.

There will be lots of fair food, including everything imaginable that can be made from pumpkins.

Admission is free, but Woodward asks that all visitors bring a carved pumpkin with a 3-inch votive candle. Folks can bring as many more as they like.

Classic New England town

I saw it for myself when I joined some 70,000 other visitors for last year's festival on a cool, crisp, sunny Saturday.

It's a good idea to get there early, before the hordes, for a look and to soak up the atmosphere. This is a classic New England college town, dating to 1736, that looks like the inspiration for a Norman Rockwell painting.

Keene's Main Street is a grand boulevard that once was touted as the world's largest. At 164-feet wide, it's wide enough to accommodate a row of four

hay wagons standing side by side.

The street is flanked by Federal-style and Italianate homes, rows of well-kept stores, coffee shops and restaurants, and the Colonial Theatre, a beautifully restored 1921 movie palace.

The central square is dominated by the white, high-steeple United Church of Christ (1786). The square has a handsome gazebo that was featured in the 1995 Robin Williams movie "Jumanji."

Surreal, orange glow

On Pumpkin Festival morning, every nook and cranny of Main Street was crammed with pumpkins. Thousands more filled four 40-foot-tall, pyramidlike scaffolds, standing like guardians at festival perimeters.

"This is typically pretty crazy. By nighttime, the crowds will be so thick, they'll be moving you along," said Kay MacLean of Keene, who was carving pumpkins at a table of the Keene State College Alumni Association.

"It's a lot of fun. The students really embrace it. They cut up 1,800 pumpkins and call it a pumpkin lobotomy," she said, laughing.

At noon, a children's costume parade attracted a diverse procession of young revelers. Witches and monsters mingled with pirates and princesses. They drew a huge group of spectators.

"This is a great place for people to get together and have a good time. There's no fighting," said Vernon Clough, a lifelong resident of Keene, who was watching his granddaughter march in a bat costume. "Where can you get free entertainment like this? It's priceless."



By dusk, Main Street was gridlocked with people. Volunteers lit thousands of jack-o'-lanterns. The scaffolds, looking like ancient Druid altars, radiated a surreal, orange glow.

A nonstop, recorded soundtrack played such Halloween pop oldies as "Monster Mash" and "Werewolves of London."

After an 8 p.m. official tally of 24,682 jack-o'-lanterns, fireworks brought the spectacle to a climax.

Prime fall foliage

Keene's pumpkin fest is just one of many charms of Cheshire County, a region known as New Hampshire's "quiet corner." It's a bucolic area marked by wooded hills, winding country roads, farms and lakes.

Mount Monadnock (3,165 feet high) dominates the setting. It's been a longtime mecca for hikers, including some famous ones: Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain and Willa Cather.

This is prime fall-foliage territory and worth a weekend to linger and explore some of the region's 40 towns and villages.

IF YOU GO

KEENE PUMPKIN FESTIVAL, KEENE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

DETAILS: This year's festival is scheduled from 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Oct. 20. Admission: free. Visitors are asked to bring at least one carved pumpkin and a 3-inch votive candle for each. Parking: \$5. Shuttle buses will transport visitors from outlying parking areas.

LODGING: The 1839 Inn at Jaffrey Center, about 12 miles from Keene, has 11 rooms. Rates range from \$110 to \$160, including buffet breakfast; (877) 510-7019.

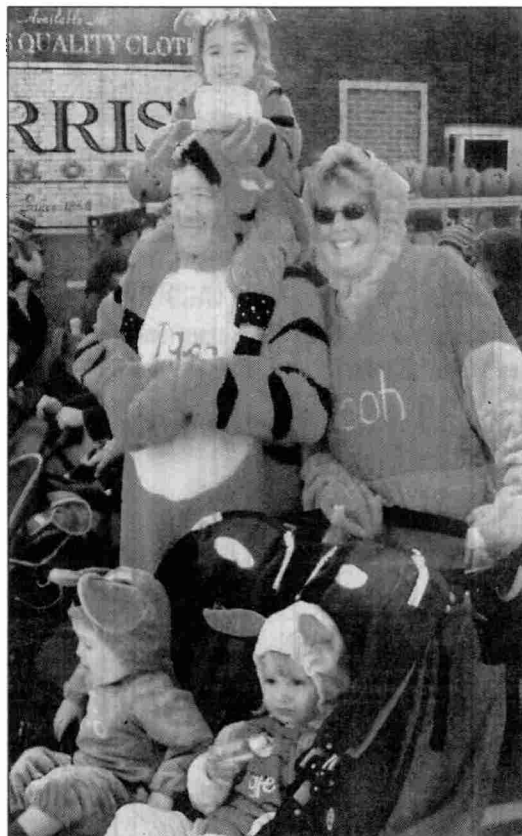
DINING: Nicola's Trattoria serves creative pasta dishes with fresh ingredients. Dinner entrees range from \$19 to \$29; (603) 355-5242.

GUIDEBOOKS: "New Hampshire: An Explorer's Guide," by Christina Tree and Christine Hamm (The Countryman Press, \$19.95), and "New Hampshire," by Jeff Binder (Fodors, Compass American Guides, \$21.95), both are top-notch books with informative chapters on the Monadnock region, including Keene, and the rest of the state.

INFO: For festival information, call Center Stage at (603) 358-5344. Visit our Web site, www.app.com, and click on this story in *Jersey Life* for a link to **Center Stage**.



A scaffold crammed with thousands of pumpkins looms over visitors at last year's Keene Pumpkin Festival in Keene, N.H. (PHOTO: DON MAGNIER)



A family (left) gets into the spirit of the children's parade at last year's Keene Pumpkin Festival in Keene, N.H. A toddler (below) plays among pumpkins on the parade route.

(PHOTOS: DON MAGNIER)

